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Building Leadership Development Programs in Law Firms

Steve Armstrong

Like other concepts that migrated from corporations into law firms, “leadership” made a slow and tentative entrance. Fifteen years ago, teaching leadership to lawyers was a novel and high-risk idea, acceptable only if the agenda was limited to “hard” topics like strategy, not “soft” topics like motivation.

Today, many firms – especially the larger ones – are trying to turn their lawyers into “leaders”; and many consultants, along with a few law schools and business schools, have been eager to help. Along the way, those running law firms have largely abandoned two traditional beliefs that stood in the way of taking leadership development seriously: Good leadership depends on innate traits rather than learned skills, and leading can’t be all that difficult for anyone intelligent enough to have become a partner. Those two beliefs were at least partly contradictory, but it was usually considered impolite to point that out.

What’s driving all the recent emphasis on leadership? Is it something more than faddishness fueled by hype from consultants? For those who will be designing leadership development programs, the question is more than academic. Because “leadership” is such a huge and vague concept, a “leadership development” initiative is likely to fail unless a firm is clear about why it needs one.

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To say that a firm needs more leaders, or that its lawyers need to develop their leadership skills, is to say, really, nothing useful. When you step into territory as large and loosely mapped as “leadership,” it’s critical to figure out what kinds of behavior you are trying to change, among whom, and why. Because these questions are so important, this article will first discuss why “leadership development” in law firms is more than a fad, and why it addresses real and pressing needs, before going on to describe how firms can meet those needs.¹

¹ In this article, I won’t even try to define “leadership” or to distinguish it from “management.” The literature contains dozens of definitions. If you’re familiar with John Kotter’s work, you may recall his distinction between the two concepts: management involves the skills needed to run complex organizations, while leadership involves the skills an organization needs in rapidly changing and unstable circumstances. In those terms, this article will focus more on management than on leadership. However, it’s a mistake to begin by trying to define the terms in the abstract. The key question is what behaviors a firm needs to develop to be more successful. The label you then put on the behaviors doesn’t really matter, though “leadership” has more cachet than “management” at the moment.

The Case for Leadership Development

Leadership has become increasingly important to law firms for at least three reasons:

1. Strategy matters, and its execution matters even more (or: “Brobeck, Heller, Thelen – who’s next?”). Even before the recession, being able to define and execute a strategy really mattered, especially for larger firms in competitive markets.

Leaving aside the ferocious competition for clients, firms that don’t live in stable niches have to worry – just as public companies always have – about maintaining or raising their profitability, about moving from declining into growing practices, and about responding to powerful trends they can do nothing to control: globalization; the mobility of partners in more lucrative practices; and the pressure from increasingly savvy and outspoken general counsel for greater efficiency, more predictable costs, and, often, steeper discounts. All that was true before the recession; now firms have to deal with their short-term tactics for surviving the downturn as well as with the long-term stresses that will remain when the recession ends.

In this world, if a firm’s leaders make the wrong strategic decisions, the firm can collapse or fall permanently behind its peers in reputation and profitability. To compound the difficulties, the recession has driven more firms to realize that they need to pay attention to their talent-management strategy as well as their strategy in the client marketplace, because the traditional model of hiring lots of highly-paid associates and sifting out a few partners after several years is too inefficient and expensive.

To thrive in these dangerous times, firms need leaders who can think strategically and – even more difficult – persuade others to have confidence in the strategy and help

implement it. Especially in larger firms, those skills can't be concentrated only in the two or three people at the top: They need to be scattered throughout the firm, in its practices and offices, because strategy at those levels matters just as much as a firm's overall strategy and can't be effectively dictated from the top.

2. The bigger the organization, the more difficult it is to lead (or: "We have an Alma Alta office? Really?"). With mergers, expansion around a region, a country, or the world, and ambitions fueled by the *American Lawyer* rankings, many firms are now big, complex, geographically-dispersed organizations, even after all the recent lay-offs. The larger and more dispersed an organization, the more difficult it is to hold together and the more likely it is that some parts of the firm will underperform.

Even if law-firm leaders had no other reasons to lie awake at night, the very size of many firms would require a lot of attention to some aspects of leadership: building a sense of common purpose; creating a consistent professional culture across heterogeneous groups; and, of course, communicating effectively with people who aren't just down the hall. I've been struck by how often the explanation for defections from an office or a practice is some version of "The firm just didn't seem to be paying attention to us." Leading large organizations not only requires more skill in those at the top; it also requires reliance on more partners throughout the firm to share leadership functions.

3. Morale and commitment matter (or: "Where's Jean now? Really?"). Even in firms that are less than huge, it's become more difficult to maintain the glue that binds the firm together. Although many firms are still blessed with relatively stable partnerships, across the profession the bonds of institutional loyalty have long since weakened. Partners and groups of partners

move among firms all the time, and many in-house positions are just as lucrative and prestigious as – and often more powerful than – law-firm partnerships. Especially after the recession ends, the demographic trends will probably continue to make things worse. Gen X is smaller than the Boomer generation, which means that the competition for mature, experienced partners will become all the more intense.

As a result of these trends, those running law firms need the skills to bind people together, by creating the commitment, loyalty, and – dare one say it? – enthusiasm that lead them to want to contribute to the firm rather than use it simply as a resumé stop or professional hotel with a great concierge service. And, once again, in larger firms many people – not just one or two at the top – need these skills. Even when a practice group is relatively small and local, leadership is not necessarily easy. In many firms, there are striking differences in effectiveness and morale among small groups or offices.

If we look at associates rather than partners, the situation becomes even more complex. Consider these two familiar facts. First, while AmLaw 200 firms grew dramatically in the decades before the recession, law-school graduating classes did not. Before the recession, the result was a seller's market for talent among laterals as well as entry-level associates. The recession has changed the market dramatically; and, even after it ends, firms will probably be on average smaller and less leveraged than in the past. But those changes are likely only to mitigate for a few years, not to wholly counteract, the demographic trends that underlie the long-term "war for talent." Second, prospects for becoming a partner are so slim in many firms – and, for some associates, partnership is so unattractive – that the lure of partnership doesn't bind most associates to a firm.

In this familiar set of circumstances, the most familiar pre-recession consequence – high attrition rates – may not be the most

important one, even when the economy rebounds and firms begin to grow again. The more dangerous result is “internal” attrition: lack of motivation, commitment, and full-out effort, sometimes consciously, but often unconsciously among associates who think they’re doing their best. This lack of engagement leads eventually to excessive out-the-door attrition (except during a recession) but it causes damage long before then.

During the boom decades, that damage was disguised because the large-firm economic model – lots of leverage, lots of work billed by the hour – did not place a premium on getting the best and most efficient work out of every lawyer at every moment. (To the contrary, many would argue.) Even before the recession, that model was under pressure from clients who are increasingly unwilling to pay for undertrained, inefficient associates or teams working on automatic pilot as they rolled up hours. The large firms that emerge from the recession are likely to have to care more about whether each lawyer is contributing as much as he or she can in quality and energy, not just in amount.²

² In recent years, research within corporations seems to have demonstrated a correlation between a business unit’s profitability and the engagement, motivation, and satisfaction of its employees. See, for example, Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, *First, Break All the Rules* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), and James L. Heskett, et al., “Putting the Service-Profit Chain to Work,” in the *Harvard Business Review* (July 2008).

For many years, David Maister in particular has been arguing that the same correlation holds for professional-service firms. However, there is no research yet to back up this claim. In fact, looking at *The American Lawyer* tables of profitability and law-firm satisfaction, that correlation doesn’t jump off the pages. It may be that other aspects of the law-firm business model – leverage; high billable-hour expectations; annual increases in billing rates; and, for some firms, premiere cost-is-not-an-object work – overwhelm the contributions that are due to their employees’ morale and motivation. In a leaner world after the recession, that may change.

To create that level of performance, a firm needs individual partners who have the mindset and the skills to motivate the range of associates with whom they work, including those who have ambitions quite different from the ambitions that drove the partners themselves when they were associates. In fact, a firm should begin to inculcate this mindset in lawyers long before they become partners. As associates become more senior, they usually begin to manage other associates; in a leveraged practice, in fact, senior associates can have just as much impact on junior associates’ performance and morale as can partners.

Behind the skills that enable others to do their best work, and as a prerequisite for developing them, lies a crucial mindset that doesn’t come naturally to many lawyers: “How I behave affects how others behave and does so in fundamental ways that are important to our work.” That specific mindset is a limited version of a more general mindset, which I’m tempted to say lies at the core of all aspects of leadership: “I am responsible not only for myself, not only for my tasks, not only for my role – but for the whole of which I’m a part.” Taken to an extreme, that mindset leads, of course, to constant angst and guilt. But, in healthy moderation, it is key to an organization’s ability to fire on all cylinders.

For newer lawyers, the mindset will be reflected less in how they “lead” others than in the behaviors to which the cliché “take ownership” applies. Those behaviors are a very early form of leadership – “leadership for followers,” we might call it – but they are an important part of the foundation for the more senior skills.

This discussion of why law firms seem to have “discovered” leadership recently is meant to establish two facts. First, law firms are paying attention to leadership because they need to, not because it’s a fad. Second, and more interesting, they face several quite different needs. Those needs differ not only

in the kinds of skills that should be developed to meet them, but also in the slices of the population affected: only partners who lead the firm and its groups and offices? all partners? also senior associates? all lawyers? (And, of course, although this article deals only with leadership programs for practicing lawyers, firms with large administrative staffs face leadership issues on that side of the firm as well.)

“Leadership” is a complex concept, and its aspects should be unpacked and contemplated separately before a firm embarks on a leadership initiative.

That said, and before I do some unpacking in the next section, a firm should decide early on whether its goal is to develop the spectrum of leadership skills across all its lawyers, or to focus on one or two sub-sets of those skills for specific levels of seniority.

For those whose job is professional development, the answer may seem obvious for two reasons. First, all lawyers should be developing some aspects of these skills; second, if a firm waits until lawyers become partners to build their leadership skills, it may be too late.

But the question is a serious one, and it should be answered on the basis of the firm’s most pressing strategic needs as well as its appetite for investing in this area. If its practice groups and offices are failing to function as effectively as they should, that points towards one goal. If it needs partners to function less as lone cowboys and more as colleagues invested in one another’s success, that points towards another goal. If it needs senior associates and junior partners to do a better job leading case and deal teams, that’s yet another goal ... and so on.

It’s better to design a limited initiative with a goal that’s clearly important to the firm than a broad one the point of which is well-intentioned but murky.

Even if the first step is a limited one, however, over the longer run the goal should be to develop the range of skills across all lawyers – step by step, of course, and with a thoughtful decision about which skills and which audience to tackle first.

This broad approach makes sense not only because it will do more good for more people, but also because specific leadership skills can’t simply be inserted successfully into someone’s career at a given point (when they have to take on a formal leadership role, for example), without the skills that are prerequisites, so to speak, having been developed previously. The skills form a developmental continuum. And that continuum doesn’t end when a lawyer becomes a partner, whether or not he or she ever takes on a formal leadership role.

As Tim Leishman of Firm Leader emphasizes, partners should move from focusing primarily on their individual practice to providing opportunities and work for others, and then on to more expansive leadership roles that help a firm, office, or group to succeed. Some may not be able to travel that path without support and guidance.

What Do You Teach When You Teach “Leadership”?

The content of a specific leadership program depends, of course, on its audience and on the behaviors it’s designed to emphasize. However, some common themes run through the content of leadership initiatives, even though all the themes are never compressed into a single program.

1. *Self-knowledge.* Lawyers – especially the senior generations – are generally not much given to what they tend to think of as “navel-gazing” and “psychobabble.” Nevertheless – or, perhaps, precisely for that reason – a starting place should be helping them to take an objective look at their own traits and behaviors and at how those

characteristics affect their ability to manage and lead. Towards this end, there are several useful methods:

- Behavior and personality assessments such as the Myers-Brigs, DISC, and LIFO, among many others. Using an assessment has several benefits. First, it breaks people of the tendency to regard their own behavior as “normal” and everyone else’s as idiosyncratic, and it demonstrates that they reside at an identifiable point on a spectrum of legitimate styles. Second, it helps them to recognize their own managerial or leadership strengths and weaknesses. Third, it helps them to think more clearly about how to work effectively with people who have different styles. And, finally, it has a very useful side effect: When a stylistic difference arises in the course of their work, they will be more willing to deal with it openly before it begins to fester.
- “Upward” or 360-degree reviews, conducted either in preparation for a program or after it as part of its reinforcement or, in some firms, as part of a periodic firm-wide process. At least for the well intentioned, the most powerful motivation for change can be the realization that others don’t see them as they thought they were seen. In addition, these reviews allow a firm to provide coaching or training where it’s most needed.

Two warnings, however.

First, it is tempting but dangerous to draw from them a formulaic “norm” for how partners should manage and lead and to assume that, if a partner’s ratings on specific questions diverge noticeably from the average, there’s by definition a “problem.” In fact, good leaders always have a range of strengths and weaknesses, and the two may be inextricably bound together. In an

upward evaluation, the key question is usually whether an associate wants to work with the partner again, not whether the partner receives “good” ratings across the questionnaire.

I emphasize this point here because it has broader relevance to leadership initiatives: Underlying every aspect of them should be a recognition that leaders can be effective in very different ways. Good leaders have assembled an effective set of strengths and have avoided destructive behaviors, but they will never be equally good at the whole package of leadership skills. If a firm tries to make everyone “good” at every relevant skill, not only will it face a Sisyphean task but it will also discourage first-rate leaders whose profile may diverge from the norm or, even, be somewhat eccentric.

Second, as Sue Manch of Shannon & Manch notes based on her experience running upward-review processes for many law firms, firms get the most benefit from these reviews when they take a developmental rather than a punitive approach. If the results are used primarily to scold or punish under-performers, the reviews won’t do much to change behavior across a group and will be universally distrusted by the population they are intended to enlighten. In contrast, if the results are accompanied by tactful coaching for the “challenged” supervisors and rewards for the best, the firm will, over time, see a good deal of change.

- Self-assessments: questionnaires through which individuals can identify for themselves their strengths and weaknesses, the skills they need to improve, and the strengths they could put to better use.
- Exposure to the research about implicit bias and unconscious preconceptions. Law firms want to be meritocracies, and

most law-firm partners believe they reach unbiased, objective judgments about the associates with whom they work.

However, all the research about implicit bias demonstrates that none of us, even the best-intentioned, is free from its effects. Although lawyers may not believe they have implicit biases just because someone tells them they do, they will pay attention to the research data, which is overwhelming.

2. Understanding motivation. Because most lawyers are by training and inclination task-oriented rather than people-oriented, most don't spend much time thinking about how to inspire others to do their best work. Even if they understand what motivates them, they are too quick to assume that the same motivational levers work for everyone else – or that everyone should be entirely self-motivated and that, if they're not, there's nothing to be done about it.

If lawyers are to lead others effectively, they have to become more adroit at getting the best work from the range of personalities and levels of competency they'll encounter. In my conversations with partners whom associates regard as particularly effective leaders, I've been struck by the number who said they woke up one day to the realization that, unless they did a better job of challenging and inspiring a range of associates, they'd never be able to leverage their own time as much as they needed to.

3. Understanding team and group dynamics. Getting the most from a group involves all the skills that motivate individuals, but also other abilities, especially if the group is geographically dispersed or heterogeneous in other ways. For example, it requires creating and sustaining a common sense of purpose; communicating well in group settings and by email as well as face-to-face with an individual; allocating roles effectively; stepping up to deal with conflicts and under-performance quickly; running meetings productively; and creating a sense

that everyone counts, even those at the bottom of a hierarchy.

4. Learning how to move people to act through influence and persuasion. Although law firms become more hierarchical as they become larger, they are still relatively "flat" in their attitudes and behaviors, compared to many other kinds of organizations. As a consequence, leaders – especially practice leaders who don't have the clout of the firm's top leaders – often have to get things done by persuasion rather than by command. That means learning ways to get others invested in and enthusiastic about a project and, finally, to take ownership of it themselves.

Among practice and office leaders, a common complaint is that they can't get other partners to function on business-development or infrastructure projects – or, more dangerous, that few partners actually take the steps they agree to take as part of the group's carefully crafted strategic plan. For the difficult task of moving people – especially people who are busy and value their autonomy – to act when you can't order them around, there are "best practices" that a program can describe.

5. Confronting difficult "people" issues and having difficult conversations. In an informal survey of a firm's practice leaders, they identified two tasks that gave them the most trouble. One was the subject of the previous paragraph. The second was tackling difficult conversations with lawyers, especially partners, who were causing conflict, under-performing, or simply not doing what they had agreed to do.

Having those conversations is often as much a matter of courage as of skill. But, again, there are "best practices" for having a difficult conversation so that it makes matters better, not worse. Some of those methods are described in a book called *Difficult Conversations*, which is based on work done by people involved in the Harvard Program on Negotiation and which has been turned into programs by several

consultants.³

6. *Developing and executing strategy.* In that phrase, the emphasis is on the verbs. Writing a strategy is right up most lawyers' alley, because it plays to their analytical and data-oriented cast of mind. Developing it as part of a group, so that most of the group buys into it, is more difficult. Executing it is even more difficult and demands a broad set of skills that many lawyers don't have.

It requires, for example, translating the strategy into specific, step-by-step goals towards which everyone aligns, like filings towards a magnet, not only because the goal is clear, but because it resonates with those who have to implement it. It requires building energy and commitment and, even, enthusiasm. It requires patience and persistence. And it requires skill in the psychological as well as the managerial side of execution: how much to ask for, when to push, how much autonomy to allow.⁴

Nothing in the previous paragraphs should be taken to understate the difficulty of getting the substance of the strategy right, as demonstrated by the number of law-firm collapses even before the recession. In this task, what lawyers often find most difficult, and what therefore requires the most emphasis in a program, is the trick of perspective that allows them to see their strategy not from "inside" the firm but from the "outside."

That means starting not from the chessboard in front of them – their practice's strengths and weaknesses, its staffing profile, its

³ Douglas Stone, et al., *Difficult Conversations* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000).

⁴ For an excellent discussion of why it's more difficult to execute a strategy in a partnership than in a corporation, see Thomas J. DeLong et al., *When Professionals Have to Lead* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2007).

clients, and the like – but from the "macro" economic, political, regulatory, and demographic trends that could destroy or reinforce the effect of any tactical moves they make on the chessboard. Successful corporations are accustomed to thinking about strategy in these terms; many law firms are not, although the recession is driving more of them to do so.

7. *Self-management.* This topic comes last because it may be the most important. Some leaders come by their abilities naturally. Most do not; as a result, they have to exercise a good deal of self-discipline, based on a good deal of self-awareness, to be effective. This self-management takes four forms, all of which should be addressed as part of a firm's overall approach to leadership, though it would be counter-productive to tackle them all in a single program.

- *Managing their affect.* A very good law-firm leader once told me that what he found most difficult about his job was that he could never be seen to be having a bad day. Lawyers who take leadership seriously take responsibility for the effect their moods, stresses, and personality quirks have on other people.

Those who tend to be low-key, perhaps even dour, have to learn to show enthusiasm and excitement. (Here's a fact that gets people's attention: Research has apparently found that top-performing leaders elicit laughter from their subordinates (intentionally, I assume) much more often than do mediocre leaders.)⁵ Those who tend to be flamboyant or "take-charge" have to learn not to suck all the oxygen from the environment. Those who thrive on last-

⁵ Research by Fabio Sala cited in Daniel Goleman and Richard Boyatzis, "Social Intelligence and the Biology of Leadership," in the *Harvard Business Review* (September 2008).

minute crises and high-stress situations have to learn not to inflict those often-unconscious preferences on others.

- *Staying organized.* This is an aspect of self-management that counts as managerial hygiene: That is, you don't get many points for being organized, but you can do a lot of damage by being disorganized. Lawyers who manage others are responsible for planning and organizing so they use others' time effectively. That requires a degree of organizational skill that goes beyond the planning needed to keep their own individual work on track.
- *Adapting the managerial and leadership methods to the circumstances.* As more than one study has shown, the best leaders are able to vary their style and tactics to suit the situations and people with whom they are dealing.⁶ The concept is simple; the application is impossible unless the leader regards how he or she behaves as being open to self-management and modification.

The Components of a Leadership Initiative

The previous section dealt with the content of leadership development programs. This section deals with their design. Its focus is not on the small-scale pedagogy of a specific training program but on the larger-scale design of an initiative that may involve an array of approaches over time.

Our starting point is a basic fact and its implications: "Leadership" is a set of behaviors behind which lie a set of attitudes or mindsets. Teaching the concept of

⁶ For a study conducted by the Hay Group among law-firm partners, see Susan Snyder and Sara Littauer, "Leadership Flexibility: How Outstanding Partners Get Results," in *Strategies: The Journal of Legal Marketing* (vol. 7, no. 3).

leadership, assuming you can get agreement on what it is, will have almost no effect on leadership behavior in the firm. Changing behavior in a large group is a complex, long-term process, especially if you are working against the grain of embedded habits or previous training. (Law school, for example, inculcates the mindset and traits that lead to individual excellence, not to leadership.) A program or two won't do much good. In fact, a lot of programs probably won't do much good, unless they are supported by other methods of guiding and motivating people to adopt the behaviors on which the firm is focusing.

Ideally, therefore, a firm would wrap around its leadership training program some of those other methods of encouraging leadership behaviors. To some firms, that ambitious an approach may seem unrealistic, and they may be tempted think that they can change behavior on the cheap, with a program here and there. Those responsible for professional development should push, however, for a broader and more systems-oriented approach.

The classic methods of changing behavior in a group include:

- Creating or clarifying expectations, and doing so repeatedly;
- Creating incentives, both positive and negative, and ensuring the incentives don't conflict with each other;
- Providing training (which may involve individual mentoring and coaching as well as formal programs);
- Providing ongoing feedback and reinforcement;

... and, of course, settling in for the long run.

Here are some more specific approaches:

1. *Periodic 360-degree or “upward” reviews.* These reviews, which I mentioned earlier, allow lawyers to understand how their leadership skills are perceived by those with whom they work. Many firms now conduct upward evaluations in which associates comment on partners’ managerial and leadership skills.

Fewer conduct reviews in which fellow partners comment on a partner’s peer-to-peer behaviors, or reviews in which members of a practice or office comment on the leadership skills of its head or on the group’s morale and effectiveness. But, for firms that need to improve how partners contribute to one another and to the firm as a whole, these other types of reviews can be even more valuable than the classic upward evaluation. They can be conducted informally (for example, through interviews during the partner-compensation process) as well as more formally through mass surveys.

One other form of review is seldom conducted but, in some practices, can be very useful: a review of how a case or deal team is organized and led. If a firm looks at the morale and efficiency of those working on its larger matters, it will usually find striking differences that can be traced back in part to their leaders. For firms whose practice relies on matters staffed by large teams, especially cross-office teams, this aspect of leadership may be one of the most important.

2. *Changes to the evaluation, individual planning, and compensation processes.* To be effective, these changes don’t need to be dramatic, but they do need to be perceptible, consistent with each other, and credibly implemented. They can include, for example:

- Changes to the evaluation criteria and forms for associates or to the compensation criteria and questionnaires for partners, to include questions about the types of leadership that are most relevant to the person being reviewed.

- If the firm has a competency or “benchmark” framework for associate development, changes to it to reflect the importance of leadership skills and experience.
- Changes to the compensation system to allow lawyers to be rewarded for successful leadership, whether at the practice or office level, on committees or ad hoc projects, or in the context of a particularly large and difficult matter.
- If the firm has annual planning processes for lawyers at any level, changes to the forms to ask about plans for taking on leadership roles or developing the leadership abilities appropriate to their seniority.

For many large firms, a specific issue recurs when they are trying to create a succession-planning process to build a pipeline for senior leadership roles. Especially if partners are still building a practice rather than approaching retirement, they are often reluctant to reduce the time they devote to their individual practice. Before they take on a leadership role, they may push for a reduction in their billable-hour or revenue targets, or for an explicit understanding about its effect on their compensation. Even if the firm were to go along with those requests, however, partners might still worry about whether their individual practices would lose too much ground and, perhaps, about whether they’d ever get home to see their families.

Firms have taken different attitudes towards these requests: Some routinely reduce billable-hours targets for practice and office leaders, for example, but many do not.

The issue is important but tricky. On the one hand, a formal leadership role takes time, and the time has to be drawn either from billable or business-development work or from family time, sleep, and the rest of one’s life outside the firm. On the other

hand, few law firms have the size that makes them comfortable with the prospect of having some of their most productive partners – partners who have built the credibility to become effective leaders – scale back on their practices. And many firms feel, with justification, that partners should expect to “give back” to the firm at some point in their careers, in return for the platform it has provided for their practices. These firms are reluctant to take steps that imply that leadership roles represent an extra or unusual demand, to be compensated for by contract-like arrangements with those who reluctantly agree to take them on.

The best approach here depends on the firm’s culture and history and is a subject for another article. But, if a firm wants to begin its leadership initiative with practice and office leaders, or with those being groomed for these roles, it should confront this issue and decide how to handle it before diving in. There’s little point trying to develop the senior leadership skills of those who don’t want to lead.

3. Changes to the overall professional-development or career-development program. If a firm needs to increase the number of lawyers who have leadership skills, and to do so for the long run and across the range of those skills, it should work from the bottom up as well as from the top down. Although junior lawyers may find it strange to be regarded as “leaders,” it’s with them that a foundation should be laid, as I noted earlier. And, as they become more senior and take on more responsibility for managing other lawyers, their development should focus on their “people” skills, not only on their technical and organizational abilities.

Ideally, therefore, the range of leadership skills should be incorporated into a firm’s competency framework if it has one, or into its evaluation criteria if it does not, with the competencies or criteria reflecting the skills appropriate to increasing levels of seniority.

In addition, a firm’s training curriculum should have a “managerial and leadership” track. In that track, it can be particularly effective to link programs to “threshold” points in a lawyer’s career, points at which they have just been promoted or where, even if there has been no formal promotion, they are becoming senior enough to take on a new level of responsibilities. If a firm conducts retreats at certain points in a lawyer’s career (mid-level or senior associate, for example, or new partner), those are obvious forums for leadership programs.

4. A succession-planning process. Most firms still place partners in formal leadership programs without any preparation other than what they are supposed to have absorbed simply by having succeeded in their individual practices. But some firms are taking a more organized approach, by identifying partners who appear to have the abilities and desire to become group or firm leaders and then giving them the experience and training that prepares them for those roles. If a firm is willing to identify those partners (and the identification can be informal and private), they become a high-value target for leadership programs.

5. Changes to the firm’s internal communications. Few firms have a formal internal communications strategy (although they should). In all firms, however, it’s possible to infer what the firm cares about from what it chooses to communicate about internally – what the firm’s leaders say at partnership meetings, for example, or the typical agenda of a practice-group meeting or the successes publicized on the internal website.

If a firm wants its members to take their leadership responsibilities seriously, then the ongoing flow of internal communication should reflect that emphasis. And part of the flow should be the not-so-occasional phone call from the firm’s leaders to congratulate lawyers not only on a new client or a major

victory but also on feats of leadership – bringing a project to a successful conclusion, creating a successful cross-disciplinary team, or running an effective committee.

There are other systemic methods for encouraging change across a group, of course. As a simple guide for thinking about what methods would work best in your firm, the following grid may be useful:

	Clarifying Expectations	Creating Incentives	Providing Training	Providing Feedback & Reinforcement
Junior associates				
Senior associates				
Partners				
Rising leaders, or those in a succession-planning program				
Group & office leaders				

Types of leadership training programs

Leadership training programs come in as many flavors as do definitions of “leadership.” Primarily, however, they vary in three ways: their scale and scope, their audience, and the follow-up that is linked to them.

1. Scale and scope. Firms have conducted programs that range in size from miniscule (three hours or less) to gargantuan, when judged against the usual scale of law-firm programs. (In other professional-service organizations, their scale would be nothing out of the ordinary.) The larger programs themselves range from two days to several days. A couple of firms have conducted multi-day programs with the collaboration of a business-school faculty. A couple of others have invested in multi-month programs, involving several group sessions and individual follow-up through coaching or guided projects.

Although longer isn’t necessarily better – and, of course, not all firms will be willing to plunge into these waters rather than dipping a toe into them – there are at least a couple of reasons for starting with a program that’s at least a couple of days long:

- A firm embarking on a leadership initiative is, almost by definition, setting out to change attitude and behavior on a large scale and over the long term. If that’s the goal, it helps to start with a program large enough and splashy enough to demonstrate that the firm is serious.
- Because a leadership program sets out to change behaviors that are complex and not easily learnable, the participants need to chew over; argue about; and, more generally, internalize what they’re hearing. All that “processing” takes time and involves formats – case studies, for example – that shouldn’t be rushed through.

- A longer program can also be a more interesting program. The length eliminates the need to rush through the program's "substance," with a heavy reliance on lecture, and allows for a more varied, entertaining, and pedagogically useful range of formats: case studies, assessment instruments and self-assessments, breakout discussions of a problem or scenario, and videotaped vignettes, among other formats.

2. *Audience.* In theory, as I've noted, the initial audience should be dictated by a firm's specific goals: Develop some partners into effective leaders of practices and offices? Develop all partners into better motivators and managers of associates? Get all partners to think more broadly about their role in the firm, not just their individual practices? Develop a broader set of non-technical skills among associates?

In practice, a firm that is prepared to invest heavily in a leadership initiative is often envisioning a broad and somewhat amorphous long-term change. As I said earlier, the change might be best defined as getting all its lawyers to take more responsibility for the success of the groups of which they are a part – whether the group is as small as a working team or as large as the firm. If that's the case, then the choice of initial audience should send a signal about the firm's seriousness, just as should the scale of the initial program.

That doesn't necessarily mean starting with the firm's top leadership. The starting place may be with a group that represents a high-return investment: practice or office leaders, or partners in the pool of candidates to assume leadership positions, or younger partners who represent the firm's future.

3. *Follow-up.* Because the program's goal is to change mindset and behavior, there should be ongoing reinforcement after it ends. One ambitious and particularly effective form of reinforcement is to extend

the "program" over several months. Those months allow not only for a series of programs but also for individualized coaching, "action learning" (that is, projects on which the participants report back), and 360-degree or "upward" assessments. This model is more familiar for business-development programs, but it is also being used for leadership programs. Other easier but less effective forms of reinforcement include shorter "refresher" sessions or simply the periodic circulation of articles or other readings.

The paragraphs above assume that a program is being conducted for a firm's own lawyers, whether it takes place inside the firm or off-site at, say, a business-school campus. For firms that aren't yet ready for a major internal initiative, it's worth noting the number of public programs that are now available, including a long-standing executive-education program at Harvard Business School for professional-service-firm leaders; a newer program run by Harvard Law School for law-firm leaders; programs by the Center for Creative Leadership; and a program conducted by Hildebrandt at George Washington University, drawing on its faculty as well as on the Columbia Business School faculty.

There are also more specialized leadership programs, such as the Leadership Academy for Women, conducted by the Project for Attorney Retention in conjunction with UC Hastings College of the Law, and an annual leadership program conducted by the Federation of Defense and Corporate Counsel and based on a set of leadership competencies designed by Shannon & Manch.

Even if a firm is conducting its own internal programs, it may still find it worthwhile to send some partners to those more intensive external programs, in part for the networking opportunities.

For the PDQ's readers, advice about the details of designing in-house skills training

programs is superfluous. However, leadership and managerial skills are different from other skills that more often find a place in a law-firm curriculum: They are more complex, more personality- and emotion-based, and more situational (that is, the relevant skills can vary a lot from situation to situation). That difference has implications that warrant a couple of comments:

- It's tempting to focus too much on the easy stuff, the simpler and more easily "seen" skills that are part of the overall skill set: giving feedback, for example, or having difficult conversations. As important as these building-block skills are, the mindsets that lie behind good leadership, and the more complex and amorphous skills such as motivating individuals and groups, are ultimately more important.
- As a corollary of the first point, programs that focus on mindset and complex, amorphous skills should do more than allow disagreement; they should be structured to force it – but not as a battle of abstractions or opinions. The debate should be about how people would handle concrete situations, captured in vignettes or hypotheticals.

That's important in part because it raises the odds that the participants will begin to internalize their own version of the mindset or skill at stake and in part because it will demonstrate that, although there are better and worse answers to difficult managerial situations, there's seldom only one solution. Mostly, however, the debate is important because it begins to inculcate the primary method by which sophisticated professionals are likely to improve their leadership skills: the habit of stepping back and reflecting on their tactics and behaviors, rather than operating solely from instinct and habit.

- The participants should be given some guidance about how to work on their skills after the program. The good news is that they should have plenty of opportunity to "practice"; the bad news is that their good intentions aren't likely to bear fruit unless they are given some focus. To that dilemma, Tim Leishman applies the concept of "deliberate practice": Each participant chooses two or three specific skills to focus on over a defined period – a task that seems defined, practicable, and likely to produce results.

A related concept is also useful: "self-coaching," which involves stepping back at periodic but defined intervals to reflect on how you've handled a specific skill or task recently, judged against how you wanted to handle it or now think you should have handled it. Neither of these methods guarantees improvement, but they raise the odds of it.

- Finally, for managerial and leadership programs, especially those for senior audiences, it's particularly important to get buy-in before the program begins. If the participants walk into the room believing that the program will address problems they face, rather than lecture at them about what someone else thinks they should do, it will get off to a much better start. One way to generate that buy-in is to ask the participants ahead of time what leadership and managerial problems or tasks they find most difficult, or to enlist them in creating "hypotheticals" or case studies built around situations they frequently encounter.

* * * *

For those of you in the professional-development field who have embarked or will embark on a leadership-development

initiative, I know of no other project that is as perpetually challenging and interesting and, ultimately, rewarding. It can engage you with lawyers at all levels of the firm, force you to think through some difficult pedagogical issues, and produce results that make a real difference to the firm.

If you're interested in further reading in this area, I would turn to:

- The books of David Maister, most of which are relevant but especially *Managing the Professional Service Firm*, *First Among Equals: How to Manage a Group of Professionals* (with Patrick McKenna), and *Practice What You Preach: What Managers Must Do to Create a High-Performance Culture*;
- *When Professionals Have to Lead*, Thomas J. DeLong et al. (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2007); and
- *Leadership Development in the Legal Profession*, Lindsey Muir and Paul Kearns (London: Ark Group, in association with Managing Partner, 2008).



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